

GEORGE W. WILLIAMS.

Whether the bountiful endowment of an individual with certain talent by a benign providence necessarily implies the withholding of the normal amount of others, and causes that lack of poise or balance so often observed in the of genius is one of those nice questions which the rapid development in psychological research has left still open to debate. This view of the subject has always been one fruitful of discussion engaging both the ingenuity of the sage and the learning of the scholar. A mere peep into Disraeli's "Literary Curiosities" or his "Calamity of Authors" will show how long and prevalent this idea has obtained in history. The poet Pope had some such thought in mind when long ago he wrote:

"As on the land while here the ocean gains,
In other ports it leaves wide sandy plains;
Thus in the soul while memory prevails
The solid power of understanding fails."

And Dryden, too, when he declared:

"Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide."

Indeed endless other examples might be brought to the witness stand here in support of this view in human history, but probably the whole subject is too well attested in the public mind for serious questioning at this late date. We have been thrown into this trend of thought by the contemplation of the meteoric career of George Washington Williams, the brilliant though erratic historian of colored America.

Williams first loomed upon the literary horizon from a soldier's life in Mexico, coming finally like some "young Lochinvar out of the West" from our own frontier garrisons. He ran in brief round the circle of preacher, journalist, writer of various kinds, legislator, diplomatist and traveler, winding up finally in a little English town far away from home and without means. And there he lies today unwept and unsung by those to whose neglected worth he reared with his history a monument more enduring than brass, and therefore, those who appreciated scholarly industry and an enlightened enthusiasm for intellectual attainments for their own worth may even yet drop a tear though belated over the sad fate of the black historian. For our own part we can never recall the restless activity, the gigantic undertakings and for the most achievements of the wayward scholar without the rising of the sorrow too deep for tears. For of that selected score of noted blacks who have "found few audience though few" in our country's literature, surely the fates have dealt more unkindly with none than with the memory of George Washington Williams.

George Washington Williams was born October 1849 at Bedford Spring, a little town midway the State on the Southern side of Pennsylvania. He himself said his mother Helen Rouse came of mixed Negro and German stocks and his father of Welsh and Negro extraction, so that from the combined blood of the two parents our

subject attained to the mixture of mulatto. Of Williams' father very little is now known, in fact nothing but as above stated by Simmons who knew Williams personally and doubtless got the facts from the historian himself. But fate has been a little kinder to the memory of the mother. She was a woman of medium size, fair in complexion with large dark eyes and black hair. She was also distinguished for her intellectual attainments for her knowledge of the German language, and of current literature in general. In addition to these she was noted for dramatic and elocutionary accomplishments, winning favorable comment wherever she appeared as a reader, and it was from her that the son inherited his gifts as a speaker and general love for literature. Before the end of the son's third year the Williams family moved from their old home on the Maryland side to Newcastle in Lawrence Co., on the Ohio side of Pennsylvania, and there the boy aided by his mother's instruction and two years' assistance of a private tutor laid a scanty foundation of a schooling which required the laborious plodding of all his after years to raise to the dignity of scholarship. This early instruction with two or three years in the public school of his town, constituted all the schooling that our author had until he entered the Theological seminary at Newton Center, Massachusetts long years afterwards, where his general knowledge of literature and history picked up in the meantime enabled him to finish the four years' course in theological studies. But though young Williams was denied the early advantages of schooling, his boyhood days were not lacking in things of genuine service to him in later years. Especially was this the case with his army career where the "battles, sieges, fortunes" he had passed in the war gave him such experience as no amount of book study could have conferred. Williams like so many other colored men prominent in after years, owed his army career to the influence of Major George L. Stearns of Massachusetts. It was Mr. Stearns' well known enthusiasm in the cause of the Union which was the means of enlisting many of the black soldiers who went to the rescue of their country in the Civil War. Mr. Stearns covered the free States with his agents in search for a colored volunteers and coming into touch with these, young Williams though under age managed to run away from his parents and enlist under the name of one of his uncles, and thus he served till the close of War.

In the army as in every other connection where our author served his ambition to excel soon placed him in the forefront carrying him rapidly from the grade of private to the rank of sergeant-major of his regiment. But our young soldier's ambition won him other distinction than promotion in his regiment; it drove him into the thick of the fight at Chattanooga, Nov. 23, 1863 where he received a wound which kept him out of the service for several months and from possible further promotion. "All the wounded in the Battle of Chattanooga, says a writer of this incident, "were brought to Washington who could be transported, and among them was

a handsome colored youth, very nearly black, named George Williams, now widely known as the historian of the Negro race in America. He was placed in a tobacco warehouse; a close warm, and unfavorable place for him to recover in. Major Stearns heard that he was wounded, sought him out and had him conveyed to a more comfortable lodging."

(Life of George L. Stearns page 317)

In fact Williams never returned to duty until he went with the army of occupation into Texas during Reconstruction times where he served with Gen. Jackson during his incumbency as military Governor of the 5th District. After resigning from the U. S. army, young Williams went over the border into Mexico and entered the army of that Republic then in the throws of the Maximillian Revolution. In the Mexican army ~~army~~ as in that of his own country, Williams' rise was rapid and substantial. By reason of his previous service, he soon attained to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of Artillery and showed his usual foresight and dash throughout his service in Mexico. Our young soldier re-entered the U. S. Army upon the termination of hostilities in Mexico and took an important part in the Comanche campaign in 1867 and other frontier service at the time.

But a change came over young Williams about this time. His mind turning from war and its horrors now sought some method by which he could save rather than slay his fellow-men. The great subject of his own soul's salvation was brought home to him while at Fort Arbuckle in 1868, and having experienced that change which reconciled him with the teachings of the lowly Nazarene he quit forever the soldier's camp for the Saviour's cause. Williams left the western barracks for points in the East, stopping for a short stay in St. Louis where he connected himself with the First Baptist Church of that city. But George W. Williams, born naturally for leadership among men, felt keenly the need of a better training than he then had, and being desirous of becoming a Baptist minister he entered the Newton Theological Seminary in the autumn of 1868 where he remained till his graduation four years later. At Newton Center, he gave such a good account of himself in his studies that he was chosen one of the Commencement speakers for the June 10, 1874. He chose for his theme on that occasion the " Early Church in Africa, and gave evidence not only of his great talent powers as ~~an~~ orator but of the trend of his mind for that historical research which reached its consummation in his history a few years afterwards. During the last year of his student days at the Theological school our subject served the Twelfth Baptist Church, then situated in Phillips St., West End, Boston, as a supply minister, and after his ordination in June 1874 he presided over that church still another year. During his incumbency he wrote and published the history of the church, and delivered one or two memorial addresses before the Robert A. Bell

Post and other organizations which brought him prominently before the public. But probably the most interesting feature about Mr. Williams' short career in Boston was the strong effort made by certain friends to have him chosen Chaplain of the State Senate. The appointment was urged because of his brilliancy in scholarship and oratory, and his adherents were not unmindful of the distinction conferred upon Rev. Leonard Grimes a predecessor of Rev. Williams in the Twelfth Baptist Church who had on several instances served as chaplain for the lower house.

Father Grimes though not so brilliant had however endeared himself to the community by a long career of antislavery usefulness and it was for this quite as much as for his great piety that he received an honor from the Massachusetts Legislature which his scholarly and soldierly successor sought but never attained. Rev. Mr. Williams resigned from his Boston charge in August, 1875 and went to Washington to try his hand at journalism, and was there welcomed by Frederick Douglass and other leading colored men. The result was the establishment of the Commoner, a paper edited with much ability while it lasted. Mr. Williams was also appointed to a clerkship in the United States post office at Washington about this time, but like most of his other undertakings before and after that date, both his journalistic and post office ventures proved to be short-lived; for we find him in charge of the Union Baptist Church of Cincinnati in February, 1876. Of that church as of the Twelfth Baptist of Boston our young divine has left us in the form of an address ~~of~~ a history which reviews its early rise and stormy career, as well as an account of the various ministers who had preceded him. With the Cincinnati charge Rev. Williams remained till the end of the following year when he was appointed internal revenue storekeeper at Cincinnati by the Secretary of the Treasury. He also served about the same time in the auditor's office as secretary of the the Four million dollar fund to build the Cincinnati Southern Railroad. But the restlessness of Williams' nature would not permit him to endure long the routine of clerical work. His mind was ever declaring for new forms and changes. Accordingly we find the young preacher by 1878 studying law in the office of Judge Alphonso Taft, a name more remembered since by reason of the exalted station of the son than by the previous honors of the father. Under the guidance of that distinguished jurist together with two years in the Cincinnati Law school, Rev. Williams became George W. Williams, Esq., at the end of the second year. But honors came thick and fast to our subject at this time; for ere he could finish his law studies a grateful Cincinnati constituency chose him to represent them in the State Legislature of Ohio. The election took place in the autumn of 1879 and the young legislator repaired to Columbus the seat of government by the beginning of the next year where he began a legislative career which proved an honor both to himself and constituency

While

While in the Legislature Mr. Williams was a member of several important committees. He served on the committee on Railroad terminal facilities, was chairman of the Library committee, and second member on that which had the supervision of Universities and colleges. He also took a very active part in the general work of the Legislature, aiding in the passage of many bills which had to do with the schools, railroads and police in Ohio. But probably the honor which he most cordially welcomed from appreciative friends was that which came to him at the hands of the Ohio Grand Army Department who elected him Judge Advocate of that State at their 5th Encampment on the 27th of January, 1881. This we believe was the first instance of a colored man's being thus honored in the G. A. R. and it shows at once the general popularity of Mr. Williams, as well as the great confidence which his old comrades in arms reposed in his ability. Other marks of distinction came to the young Statesman from his old comrades and from other sources during his stay in Columbus, but he had already found the subject which was destined to prove the chief work of his life.

We have already seen the natural bent of his mind from his commencement address at College and the one or two church histories written during his pastorate in Boston and in Cincinnati. This innate tendency was greatly quickened by his service on the committees on libraries and schools in the Legislature where opportunity was given him to touch elbows with books. The first fruit of this opportunity was "The History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1830", which he brought out in a two volume edition in 1883. This history really proved to be Williams' most ambitious undertaking and remains till this day the most comprehensive work on the subject embraced yet attempted. In his preparation of the work he traveled extensively throughout the country, and drew heavily on the Library of Congress as well as on those in Boston and New York. In fact his high rank in G. A. R. circles and as a legislator won him an entre into all libraries, and that he made good use of this entre is clearly borne out by the ten thousand volumes which he consulted in the preparation of his history. Our young author found the subject of the colored man and that growing out of his new status in the Republic a most fruitful one for his pen. He wrote beside the work above named, a history of the Negro troops in the war of the Rebellion which he brought out in 1887 and the "History of the Reconstruction of the Insurgent States" which he gave to the world in 1889. These three works written and published during the decade between 1880 - 1890 may be regarded as the real life-work of George W. Williams though they by no means constitute the sumtotal of his endeavor; for his adventurous bark sought out new havens on many seas as Columbus-like he strove to enlarge the narrow limits set for a circumscribed people. Three novelettes and a drama from his pen belong also to this decade of his great literary endeavor. But the most important service of George W.

Williams apart from his serious literary undertaking is his work in connection with Congo Free State. That African kingdom which has engaged the attention of Europe in some form now for more than 400 years came into ^{the} glaring limelight of international politics again on the bestowal of supreme control over it upon King Leopold the II of the Belgians. This act was done by the powers at the International conference which sat in Berlin in 1883, and like the famed apple tossed upon the table at the wedding feast of yore, straightway became the source of endless discord. The subject at once invited the attention of leading publicists at the time, and is still the bete noir of international statesmanship. Williams who was among the first on Americans to notice the current of European opinion respecting that African country began a careful investigation into conditions there. He made himself thoroughly acquainted with everything relative to the subject and wrote a series of newspaper articles as early as 1883 on African geography. His

deep earnestness and activity about the status of the Congo was further shown by the addresses he made before the Senate Committee on Foreign relations and other public gatherings at this time. In fact he was so interested in the matter that he attended the International conference at Berlin which erected the Congo into the Congo Free State in 1885. Indeed he made several trips to Europe visiting all the important centres there and extending one of them finally much to the annoyance of King Leopold of the Belgians, into the Congo Free State itself. Williams seems to have gone to Africa as one of those secret agents which the President is permitted to employ from time to time in the interest of the government. The indifference with which he treated the objection of King Leopold to his going to the Congo and the careful report of his observations there which he submitted to President Harrison would indicate that our author went under commission. The author himself speaks of being at Munich, Germany in the early '80's where he saw "a great military painting" representing the Tirailleurs Algeriens, France's colored troops in action during the Franco-Prussian war. He was again abroad in 1888 and made a speech in London before the World's conference of Foreign Missions on the drink question in the Congo which caused much comment on both sides of the waters. (See note page 38 Negro Troops in the Rebellion)

Williams attended the antislavery reunion in Boston in the autumn of 1889 where he offered a resolution against the slave-trade then so flagrantly going on in Africa and requesting our government to join with others in its suppression. Consequently he was appointed by President Harrison, sailed for Europe late in 1889 where he remained two months, attending the International conference at Brussels for the suppression of the slave trade in Africa, and acquainting himself generally with the Congo situation. But not successful in obtaining such information as he desired from the Belgian ruler and statesman, Williams quit Brussels for London on the 21st of January, 1890 and sailed for a personal inspection

of the Congo and its conditions on the 30th, arriving there after 53 days, on the water, about the last of March 1890. The ardent young traveler remained in the Congo Free State some four months, visiting all parts of the country. With a retinue of some 85 followers he traveled more than 3000 afoot and otherwise camping in the wilds when without other accommodations. He wrote the result of his observations in a very strong and lucid letter to President Harrison from St. Paul de Loonda, South West Africa in October 1890 and also a letter severely criticizing the royal administrative policy of government to King Leopold himself. Several other communications from the same trenchant pen came from that far off quarter about the same time, but the writer himself never again reached his native land. In the report sent from the Congo he said he traveled 3,266 miles through that country, spending in perfect health, a hundred and twenty-five days journeying there, with not a death or mishap among the 85 natives fellow-travelers with him. But our enthusiastic young traveler did not escape so completely

the dangers of the African climate as he thought. The deadly virus of the reeking miasma that lurks everywhere there had unawares punctured a seemingly impregnable constitution. He cruised leisurely back to Europe during the winter and early spring of 1891 where he spent some time seeking the latest developments on his subject. A story also got afloat some time in the early months of 1891 that he was about to marry an English lady of Liverpool but that the union was prevented through the fear of opposition in America. But probably this was only another of those invariable rumors which duly make their appearance at some point in the life of every distinguished colored American - it apparently seeming impossible to the average American mind for ~~xx~~ a colored man whatever his distinction to be brought into contact with white women without the desire of marriage. Williams always dressed well and being a man prepossessing in looks and of fascinating ways naturally made an impression in England where he spent much time in the last year or so of his life, and where race-feeling is not always regarded as the highest attainment. In all likelihood Williams had no more intention of marrying the English lady than he had of marrying some one of the Congo belles he had just left behind him.

But in the midst of all our author and traveler who had won the affections of a native in the Congo land of his forebears was summoned to an altar where no question of racial hostility could be pleaded as a reason for delay; for the engagement had been contracted in the aguish marshes of the Congo tropics, and, in consequence of this claim the High Sheriff Deane sued out on the 1st of August, 1891 an injunction against the further movements of George Washington Williams, while the historian and traveler was the guest of the Palatine Hotel in Blackpool, England. Feeling probably that the course of Williams in attacking Belgic rule in the Congo, and his severe criticism of Henry M. Stanley was without warrant and

that Williams acted without authority, that part of the press which was dependent on the bureau agency for its information about him was now inclined to speak somewhat slightly of his merits and achievements; but this was not the case with all. It may be well to give a representative opinion of both views of the author; and first from the Boston Herald:

" Williams' History of the colored Race in America was published in two volumes. It was good. He showed it to Gov. Chas Foster of Ohio, and the latter was so fascinated with it that he advanced \$5000, it is said, to publish the books. From Ohio Williams drifted East. He claimed to practice law in Boston and New York. He never made any money so far as his acquaintances could see, yet, he always had plenty of it. He made trips to the foreign countries and with letters from the President, secretary of State, and other distinguished Americans he was received by the Kings and principal rulers of the globe. He was lionized. Returning to America he represented himself as being interested in opening up the Congo Country. He sailed around for many months and days now with distinguished men living at the Hoffman House in New York, the Ebbitt in Washington and other fashionable hotels at great expense and yet it could not be ascertained where he was employed or from whence he got his means of living. A gentleman once said to him: 'Colonel, I marvel at your good clothes, full face, plenty of money and no work. As a cheeky character, you seem to be a success' ".

Boston Herald, Aug. 5, 1891

Here is another opinion from the Springfield Republican a paper always discriminating and well informed as to public men and measures:

" Aside from his newspaper work, he has done serious and not unimportant labor in his " History of the Negro race in America from 1619 till 1830" published in two volumes at New York in 1833; his History of the Negro Troops in the war of the Rebellion (1837) and his History of the Reconstruction of the Insurgent States, 2 volumes, 1839. These works although charged with many inaccuracies are worked by much ability, and the first which is the best possesses decided interest. Unfortunately Mr. Williams did not bear a good reputation. The best men of his own race of late years have refused to endorse him, and he has been under a cloud. He was an intellectual man, of fine manners, and social tact, and made his way easily."

Springfield Republican, Aug. 5, 1891.